

The early years: what practitioners and policy makers need to know

Early years briefing

BRIEFING PAPER 4: SCOTLAND'S NEW GOVERNMENT AND ITS PROMISES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES.

The SNP manifesto has a strong commitment to supporting young children and their families.¹ Legislation and some financial investment is being promised, but ensuring this has the transformative impact required to really change children's lives in Scotland is the task in hand.

In the last 3 years, the number of children in Scotland under 5 has risen by approximately 5%. Children in Scotland's recent report, *The Costs of Childcare*,² found the number of centres providing early childhood education and care has gone down by 3% and in some areas children are accessing their preschool education entitlement late, when they are nearing 4. There is a limited, fragmented supply of services, falling short of targets set by the European Council in 2002 (Barcelona Targets) which aimed for full day care to be available for a minimum of 33% of under 3s and 90% of 3-year-olds until school age.³ Costs to parents are increasing, and funding and payment arrangements are complicated and varied. Changes to UK welfare reform legislation mean less money can be claimed in tax credit. Poor access and high costs contributes to child poverty.

Westminster Ministers are currently debating legislation on parents' obligation to take up paid work, while legislation affecting the quality and supply of early childhood education and care are reserved matters, and there are different laws in place particularly in relation to support for out-of-school care.⁴

This briefing highlights and comments on the main SNP commitments on early years issues. A full list of SNP commitments concerning the early years and children and young people and families is on Children in Scotland's website (see references).

Legislation

"We will review the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to bring it up to date and we

will introduce new legislation that creates an obligation on councils, the health services and government to deliver early years services and to see early years education as an essential part of the learning journey."

This commitment stresses different sectors working together and yet despite European policy and of a wealth of research and reports on this topic, still refers to early childhood education as a matter separate from care.

Legislation should be ambitious, have a long-term strategic goal in mind and while pragmatic should not encourage a 'race to the bottom'.

Legislation for universal entitlement to early childhood education and care, part subsidised, and part paid for by parents through a Nordic style means-related charging policy from birth to school age would provide an integrated solution to these issues of 'education' and 'care' and could be introduced gradually through phased national targets.

Early childhood education and care

"We will focus initial efforts on those from the most deprived backgrounds and ensure all get access to pre-school teachers and that the expansion of nursery education continues."

"We will put Childcare For All at the centre of our ambition for families in Scotland."

Understanding the divide between the concepts of education and care for young children is key to decisions about improving children's lives in Scotland.

European policy and research including the EC funded Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion⁵ stresses the importance of joined up 'integrated' services for children from birth to school age as key to having positive impacts on children's lives.

This research, along with the recommendations made by the European Commission's Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care⁶ stresses the importance of universal services and support for families. Attempting to target services to those deemed most in need can miss those who would benefit, and the segregation it produces can stigmatise and reinforce a long-term sense of separation from the mainstream. It is simply not the best value for money in the long-term.

Sure Start Change Fund: £50 million

"We will invest in projects including ... the model of a new generation of children and family centres across Scotland."

It is important to recognise that £50 million spread over five years is not a significant investment across Scotland at a time of local cuts.

If legislation with phased targets is put in place, this money should be made available to support local authorities as lead partners to achieve these in ways that make sense locally, but will be clearly accountable in Single Outcome Agreements.

Ensuring those with most to benefit from extra help gain most from this investment means both short-term provision linked to existing identification of need and long-term strategic plans to increase and redistribute universal provision for integrated early childhood education and care.

Rather than ring-fencing money to rigid models, and if this money is to complement the one-year Early Years Early Action Fund, then the criteria for both funds should be better aligned to legislation and to long-term strategies, defined nationally and locally, for universal services. Money should be invested in ways that attract and match other funds such as statutory education and social services budgets, or structural funds.

A bidding process, rather than top-down allocation, might ensure this funding is used to best effect.

A parenting strategy

"A National Parenting Strategy that encourages parents to work together to support new parents and allow them to develop their parenting skills ... parents will have access to a guaranteed level of support across the country."

The latest Growing up in Scotland findings⁷ indicate that those who are most in need of services are those least likely to access them.

Meaningful support for parenting that helps change behaviour and improves children's lives comes from long-term trusting relationships with professionals and not from short-term courses.

Universal early childhood education and care settings that welcome all parents can support positive parenting, offer opportunities for peer support, and identify where extra support would help, which does not always match the stereotypes of parents in need.

Many of those working with young children are less experienced at working with parents and need support and encouragement to do this well. Relationships of trust between frontline staff and parents are the best way to provide support, particularly for those unlikely to attend formal parenting classes.

Working it Out,⁸ Scotland's national debate on shaping the children's sector workforce, offers a proposal for providing such support: its proposed pilots for Scottish pedagogy qualifications for skills in communication, relationships and working with parents

and communities should be explored.

A parenting strategy should reflect the ethos of Getting it Right for Every Child to move from a deficit reaction-approach to a positive promotion of universal wellbeing.

Maternity care and health visiting

"A re-elected SNP Government will roll out Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) across Scotland."

Pre-conception health, and wellbeing during pregnancy need to be a higher priority for the new Government. Very early support before or during pregnancy can dramatically change children's lifelong health.⁹

The Family Nurse Partnership model is a high cost, targeted service, which, while it reports transformational change in client groups' lives, is not a level of support available to all new mothers who would benefit from it. The extra financing of this model should not mean less support for all other new parents as, has been stated above, universal approaches have a greater positive impact.

The Family Nurse Partnership works with new fathers too, and the need to involve and support their vital role in the lives of babies needs particular emphasis among health boards.

The FNP programme ends when children are aged 2. The Government should outline how it proposes to build on this intensive support for children and families at this important stage, when no statutory support is currently available.

For the introduction of the health check for 24-30 month year olds to have an impact, local authorities and health

boards need to ensure support is available immediately concerns are raised and this might include a combination of child care and parental support, of the kind offered by a child and family centre (and funded by the ChangeFund), as well as a specific health-related inputs.

Early years taskforce

"We will create a taskforce across government that has as its objective the coordination of policy to ensure that early years spending is prioritised by the whole public sector."

An independent taskforce should be created to scrutinise the progress and integration of early years policy. The new government should recall the management board of the Early Years Framework to undertake this work.

Flexible working

"We will convene a national summit with Scotland's business community to explore new ways of incentivising and encouraging more flexible working, to make it easier for parents with young children."

It is important not to over-prioritise the needs of parents with young children over those caring for older children (often soon to be parents themselves), kinship carers, or the increasing number of those caring for older people.

Scotland's business community should consider flexible working in relation to supporting families.

It is also important to consider the particular influence of early childhood education and care private sector employers and whether they are able to offer flexible and stable employment conditions.

If you have any comments about this briefing or suggestions about professional practice or strategy, then please contact Sara Collier at scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk or on 0131 222 2412.

This document is one in a series of Children in Scotland briefings that highlight issues, research or areas of policy that have a particular impact on children's early years and on the diverse workforce that provides services for this group. This work is supported through grants from **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation** and the Scottish Government's Child and Maternal Health Division. Published by *Children in Scotland - working for children and their families (SC003527)*

References

- (1) All the SNP pledges relating to children, young people and families on the policy section of our website www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly_w_com.htm
- (2) Children in Scotland, (2010) *The Costs of Childcare* www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/pub_tshow.php?ref=PUB0362
- (3) Presidency Conclusions 15-16 March 2002, Barcelona (Barcelona Targets p.12) www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/71025.pdf
- (4) *Welfare Reform Bill, Westminster, 13 June 2011* www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/pub_tshow.php?ref=PUB0362
- (5) Children in Scotland (2008-2010). *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion.* www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi
- (6) Children in Scotland, (2011) *Early Years Briefing No. 3, The European*

Commission's Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/policy/EYF%20briefing%20paper3v3.pdf

- (7) Growing up in Scotland, *Research Finding No.1/2011* www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/05/11155852/0
- (8) Children in Scotland (2008-2010) Working it Out www.childreninscotland.org.uk/workforce/index.htm
- (9) Children in Scotland, (2011) *Briefing Paper 2: Preconception (Pre-pregnancy) health* www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/policy/EYFbriefingpreconceptionv3.pdf

Further reading

Manifesto pledges are taken from the SNP online manifesto http://manifesto.votesnp.com/scottish_futures_fund
NESSE, (2010), *Early childhood education and care, key lessons for policy makers* www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports/ecec-report-pdf